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*Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta*

# 'Special Forces' From the Soviet Union

Soviet special forces—the *Spetsnaz*—have a rough similarity to our Green Berets and other countries' elite commando units. But the significant difference is that the trained killers of the *Spetsnaz* have always operated under the sinister direction of the military secret police, known by the initials *GRU*.

The political orientation of the *Spetsnaz* has often led to assignments that are far removed from Western ideas of what military units should be doing in peacetime: from assassinations in Afghanistan to sabotage in El Salvador. The *Spetsnaz*—or politically reliable units like them—have a history dating back to the first chaotic years following the Bolshevik Revolution.

Assassination, deception, disruption and surprise attacks in rear areas were used by the fledgling Red Army's "special assignment" cavalry in the civil war against the Whites from 1917 to 1920. And Lenin's dreaded secret police units, the *Cheka*, discouraged any thought of retreat by the regular army troops by the simple expedient of machine-gunning anyone who ran.

Stalin used special police units to enforce the ruinous collectivization of 1929-30 that led to the starvation of millions of peasants in the Ukraine

alone. In the early, disastrous stages of the Nazi invasion of 1941, it was the summary execution of field commanders by special forces that kept Soviet commanders from retreating—and millions of its finest troops were killed or captured in the German blitzkrieg.

It was also during World War II that the modern heritage of the *Spetsnaz* took shape. Soviet partisans carried out a wide variety of guerrilla attacks, espionage, sabotage and assassination behind the Nazi lines.

Such successes as "Operation Railway War" in July 1943 were the model for *Spetsnaz* planning today. Soviet guerrillas derailed 836 German military trains and blew up 184 railway bridges and 556 road bridges at the height of the battle for Kursh—the greatest tank battle in history, which broke the back of Hitler's panzers.

Since World War II, however, Soviet *Spetsnaz* forces have written a less bloody and far less honorable record—from the brutal suppression of revolt in Bulgaria in the mid-1960s to the extinction of the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The primary *Spetsnaz* mission in Afghanistan

was to assassinate the American-educated Soviet puppet president, Hafizullah Amin, to make way for someone even more subservient to Moscow. Amin had survived subtler attempts by the KGB to poison him, so the *Spetsnaz* action in December 1979 was a full-scale military assault. Amin was holed up on the top floor of the high-walled Darulaman Palace southwest of Kabul. The palace guard fought desperately against the *Spetsnaz* commandos for more than three hours, but were finally overwhelmed.

The *Spetsnaz* killers found their quarry drinking at a bar with a beautiful courtesan at his side. They killed everyone, so that no witnesses could attest that this was anything but an indigenous Afghan uprising against Amin.

Only a few months later, in August 1980—after one American commando raid on Iran had failed and another was considered likely to rescue the embassy hostages in Tehran—*Spetsnaz* forces were poised with the crack Soviet 105th Airborne Guards to move into northwestern Iran from Baku.

The *Spetsnaz* have been busy in Afghanistan ever since the initial invasion, launching surprise attacks against the *mujaheddin*. "Spetsnaz units were deployed to Afghanistan prior to the December 1979 invasion," a secret Pentagon report notes. "Its presence has provided the Kremlin a key instrument with which to conduct a variety of tactical and strategic operations designed to counter the Islamic insurgency."

There is some evidence that the *GRU* may be exporting *Spetsnaz* experts to Central America. Some Pentagon specialists believe the sabotage of the crucial Cuscatlan bridge in El Salvador during the winter of 1984 was too skillfully done to have been the work of native communist guerrillas.

There is also the puzzle of the much-headlined (if belatedly discovered) Soviet combat brigade stationed in Cuba. What is its purpose? Some intelligence analysts think it constitutes a Praetorian Guard to protect Fidel Castro if things get rough. Others think it could be a *Spetsnaz* unit training for a special operation, such as striking against the United States. "Another mission of [Spetsnaz]," the secret Pentagon report notes, "is training and assistance provided to foreign insurgent and terrorist groups."

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